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CHAUCEER AND PETRARCH: TWO NOTES ON THE "CLERKES TALE"

I. THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF INDEBTEDNESS TO PETRARCH

The words which Chaucer puts into the mouth of his Clerk, expressing obligation to Petrarch for the story of Griselda, have hitherto figured in discussion chiefly in their bearing on a matter of biographical detail—as evidence, accepted or rejected, for the actual meeting of the two poets. In this aspect the passage has been debated back and forth for nearly two centuries, and has become stereotyped at length into one of those haunting problems from which excessive treatment has banished all interest and profit. In what I have to present concerning the form of Chaucer's acknowledgment, I wish that it were possible to avoid allusion to this biographical question altogether, for I am truly not concerned with it, but only with the explanation and illustration of the artistic or literary technique employed. Still, since it is true that my conclusions have a bearing upon the matter, not revolutionary nor even novel—for they will only confirm the attitude of conservative scholarship since Tyrwhitt, which is merely agnostic—I shall not perhaps wholly escape some entanglement with the literature of the controversy.

Among the arguments of those who have seen in the *Clerk's Prologue* satisfactory evidence for the actual meeting of Petrarch and Chaucer, no stronger one has been found than the contention that the form of Chaucer's acknowledgment is exceptional and unique, and corresponds, therefore, to exceptional circumstances in his relation to the author from whom he has drawn, viz., personal acquaintance. To M. Jusserand¹ in 1896, as to Godwin² in 1803,

¹ Jusserand, in the *Nineteenth Century* for June, 1896, p. 996: "A statement of this sort is of a very unusual kind. Chaucer derived the subjects of his tales and of many of his minor poems from a variety of authors, living or dead, and he never went into so many particulars. It seems *prima facie* obvious that this unusual way corresponds to an unusual intention, and that, instead of merely giving his authority, he wanted here to commemorate and preserve the remembrance of an event the souvenir of which was dear to him."

² Godwin, *Life of Chaucer*, Vol. II, p. 150: "We may defy all the ingenuity of criticism to invent a different solution for the simple and decisive circumstance of Chaucer having

this is one of the two considerations which seem to raise a possibility of much imaginative appeal to the level of an historical certainty. I have no biographical interest in challenging this conclusion, but the premise upon which it is based affords me a convenient foil against which to define my purpose in touching upon this question: It is, to show that the acknowledgment which Chaucer makes to Petrarch corresponds exactly to a general method used in the citation of *literary sources* in a related form of ancient literature, the Ciceronian dialogue.

The suggestion that the conclusions, drawn from a study of the method of citing literary sources in the ancient dialogue might be of service to students of modern literature, I owe to my colleague, Professor Manly, who pointed out to me the similarity of Chaucer's expression of obligation in the Clerk's Tale to certain typical instances which I had adduced from ancient literature and presented in a paper read¹ before the Philological Society of our university.

I there explained that the dialogue, as a dramatic reproduction of conversation, seeks to maintain the fiction that oral communication is the normal method for the exchange of ideas between contemporaries, and that therefore, so far as possible, it avoids allusion to books even in acknowledgment of literary obligations. When such acknowledgment is to be made, it places the characters of the dialogue in some relation of personal communication with the sources of the ideas presented. This usage I illustrated in some detail from the dialogues of Cicero, which I grouped into two classes: (1) dialogues the dramatic setting of which lies wholly in the past; (2) dialogues contemporary with the time of the writer, in which he himself participates; here I differentiated again between expressions of obligation (*a*) attributed

gone out of his way, in a manner which he has employed on no other occasion, to make the clerk of Oxenford confess that he learned the story from Petrarca, and even assign the exact place of Petrarca's residence in the concluding part of his life." M. Jusserand (pp. 997 f.) also makes much of this last point, showing by new evidence that, contrary to the usual belief, Petrarch was actually at Padua, and not at Arqua, just at the time of Chaucer's sojourn in Italy. But Petrarch whether at Arqua or Padua was still *Petrarcha Patavinus*.

¹ At the second meeting of the winter quarter, 1906: "Literary Sources of Cicero's *Brutus* and the Technique of Citation in Dialogue." It is published in the *American Journal of Philology* for July, 1906.

to other interlocutors, and (*b*) those which the author himself, as a speaker in the dialogue, makes.

Of the first type the *De oratore* affords a good illustration. Here, in Book I, the scholastic discussion concerning the nature of rhetoric and its relation to philosophy and statesmanship is set forth. From other sources we know that this problem was discussed with special zeal in the second half of the second century B. C. by Greek philosophers and rhetoricians in Athens and in Rhodes. It is certain that from their writings Cicero had his knowledge of this controversy and drew from them the materials which he places in the mouths of his characters. They, however, in the dramatic mechanism of the dialogue do not once refer to these writings, but profess to have their knowledge of the subject from actual conversations and debates with the philosophers or rhetoricians in question. This is the consistent method of allusion to sources contemporary with the dramatic date of the dialogue employed throughout the treatise. Conspicuous writers of an earlier time are cited freely enough ("Aristoteles, Isocrates, Theophrastus ait, dicit," etc.), but wherever allusion or acknowledgment is made to a contemporary or to some one of the immediate past, it is through some dramatic device of personal association or communication.

Of the second class (2, *a*) the *Academica priora* (Lucullus) affords a conspicuous illustration. In this dialogue we have a treatise drawn from a work of the Greek philosopher Antiochus, which Cicero has, in fact, almost transcribed. This obligation, however, he does not acknowledge directly, but through the means of a dramatic situation, as follows: Lucullus is represented as having come to Alexandria as proquaestor with Antiochus, where they met one Heraclitus of Tyre, a friend of Antiochus and a fellow-philosopher. They had just received a remarkable book of Philo, the master of Antiochus, which was so revolutionary in its doctrine that for several days it afforded material for discussions between Antiochus, Heraclitus, and other philosophers, to which Lucullus listened with great interest and participation. As a result he mastered the subject thoroughly and so explains his ability to present the views of Antiochus in the dialogue, the

scene of which is laid some years later at Rome. This case is one of peculiar interest, because Cicero later became dissatisfied with the setting he had given the matter, since the person of Lucullus seemed on reflection inappropriate for a display of interest and erudition in such matters. Accordingly, in a second edition of the work (*Academica posteriora*) he allotted the principal rôle to Varro. But Varro in turn does not acknowledge a literary obligation to Antiochus, but professes to reproduce from memory the lectures which he had heard in his youth.

The last type (2, *b*), in which the writer himself as an interlocutor in the dialogue refers matter derived from a literary source to oral communication or personal intercourse with the author of the literary source in question, was, for the purposes of my investigation into the sources of the *Brutus*, the most important of all. Examples of this type were also found where it was possible to show with reasonable certainty that the same method of acknowledgment of literary sources was employed as in the former cases. That is, as soon as the author himself steps into the scene of the dialogue drama which he has created, he becomes subject to the same rule as he applies to the other characters of the dialogue. For the purposes of our present inquiry it is not necessary that I should illustrate this form by detailed examples. I will only add that by recognition of the nature of this method (which was yielded by a comparison of examples from Cicero's philosophical dialogues) it was possible to recover important fragments of pre-Ciceronian literature, which have hitherto passed for narratives derived from Cicero's boyhood acquaintance with the men from whom he professes to have heard them.

The principle of dialogue composition thus set forth is a natural one: it rests upon the universal psychology (so to speak) of the situation, rather than upon any recognized rule or tradition of art. It is not, so far as I am aware, alluded to in any ancient discussions of the theory of dialogue, unless it be implied in the suggestive phrase of Demetrius (*De elocutione* 224): ὁ διάλογος μιμείται αὐτοσχεδιάζοντα—"the dialogue reproduces the tone of extempore or improvised speech." Neither has it been formulated by any modern students of the ancient dialogue, though in practice

it has sometimes been recognized by the investigators into the sources of Cicero's philosophical works (Hirzel, Reid, and others). There is no doubt, I think, that the dialogue or similar dramatic literature of any language would reveal the same usage, and a number of analogous examples I have noted from the English dialogues of Bishop Hurd (who facilitates inquiry by the considerate use of learned footnotes). So, for instance, in the *Dialogue on the Uses of Foreign Travel* (between the Earl of Shaftesbury and Locke) Hurd incorporates a story and an exact quotation from Shaftesbury's *Characteristics*, which he places in the mouth of Locke, and makes acknowledgment for this indebtedness by causing Locke to address Shaftesbury with the words: "As I have *heard* you tell the story."

The application of these observations to the *Canterbury Tales* and to Chaucer's expression of obligation to Petrarch will be seen at once. The ancient dialogue, especially of the Ciceronian type, has in all essential respects a mechanism and technique analogous to the type of dramatic narrative which the Germans call picturesquely the *Rahmenerzählung*. In both the author introduces the characters, sets them in relations of conversational intercourse with one another, and out of such situations develops the longer narratives or discussions which are the real purpose of the composition. In both the aim is to maintain in the interludes which introduce or conclude the longer narratives an atmosphere of natural conversational intercourse suitable to the character of the interlocutors. If the author has acknowledgments of indebtedness for particular parts to make, they must be made through the utterances of his speakers in a manner conformable to the unrestrained and conversational nature of the whole situation. In the ancient dialogue, as we have seen, the participants are placed in a relation of oral communication with the sources from which they profess to draw. The reasons for this are obvious: the desire to avoid the appearance of pedantry which would result from the actual citation of a written source; the further desire to give to the communication an air of novelty, as of something which, though derived from another, is now communicated to the present audience for the first time. No one likes to confess that

he got his joke from *Punch*; it suits his own and the listeners' sense of effectiveness much better to attribute it to personal experience,¹ or to direct communication from someone either named or nameless,² or merely to remembrance.³ It is this universal feeling which the dialogue, or other similar literary forms, aims to reproduce. The source indicated by the speaker may or may not be the actual source from which the author drew.⁴ That is a point which must be determined in each case for itself. The essential thing is that the interlocutor will not, as a rule, make acknowledgment to a literary source, except in referring to well-known authors of an earlier time.⁵

With this preface we may now note the acknowledgment which the Clerk makes to Petrarch:

I wol yow telle a tale which that I
 Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,

 Fraunceys Petrark the laureat poete, etc.

The form of allusion to the source is, it will be seen, identical with the examples which I have cited above for the ancient dialogue (under the heading 2, *a*), as when Cicero causes Lucullus to confess obligation to Antiochus for matter which he heard at Alexandria. The two examples are perfectly parallel—Chaucer, the Clerk, and Petrarch, corresponding exactly to Cicero, Lucullus, and Antiochus. In each case the author's source was a literary one, but, in conformity with the demands of the underlying dramatic fiction, in each case it is transformed into an oral one. Professor Skeat, on the evidence of this passage, says (Vol. III, p. 454): "Chaucer himself tells us that he met Petrarch at Padua,"

¹ As, for example, in the *Cooks Tale* (A 4342): "I wol yow telle as well as ever I can | A litel jape that fil in our citee." So also the *Friars Tale*, D 1299. Cf. the *Pardoner's Prologue*, C 460: "A moral tale . . . which I am wont to preche."

² The *Clerkes Tale* (source named). The *Man of Laws Tale* (source indicated): "a marchaunt, gone is many a yere, | Me taughte a tale" (B 131).

³ Sir Thopas (B 1897): "For other tale certes can I noon | But of a rhyme I lerned long agoon." The *Franklins prologue* (F 713): "And oon of hem have I in remembrance."

⁴ So, for example, the *Man of Laws Tale* is attributed vaguely to a "marchaunt;" it was derived by Chaucer from Nicholas Trivet.

⁵ For the Ciceronian dialogue I refer to such general allusions as "Plato (Aristoteles) ait," etc. Chaucer parades classical names sometimes ostentatiously, often in playful satire of the pedantry of his time. See the end of the *Wife's Tale* and the protest of the Friar (D 1276), "and lete auctoritees, on goddes name."

and in a note he adds: "to which it is not unusual to object by insisting that it was not Chaucer himself who met Petrarch, but the Clerk who tells the tale. I doubt if this amounts to more than a quibble." Resuming again in the text, he continues: "Only let us suppose for a moment that Chaucer himself knew best, that he is not intentionally and unnecessarily inventing his statements, and all difficulty vanishes." But in the light of the examples which have been adduced it will require no arguments to show the complete misapprehension of the poet's technique which these words contain. That Chaucer invents his statements we shall not deny; that he invents even intentionally is also true. We shall not, however, concede that he invents unnecessarily, though the necessity in this case is perhaps to be called rather an artistic impulse, arising from the demands of the general dramatic scene which the poet has created.

Indeed, one may go a step farther and raise Professor Skeat's "quibble" to a higher power. One may safely contend that, even if Chaucer himself had chosen to narrate the story of *Griselda* (instead of Sir Thopas and Melibeus), and in his rôle as a character in the dramatic situation explained that he had learned the tale from Petrarch at Padua, we should still not be certain that we were standing on historical ground in taking his assurance literally. As in the third group of examples cited above for the ancient dialogue (2, b), it might still be merely the fiction of the author moving his characters (including himself) in such a way as to make the expression of obligation suitable to the conversational character of the whole setting. Much less ground is there for identifying Chaucer with the Clerk. As well might we infer that Cicero had been present at Alexandria and heard the discussions of Antiochus which he causes Lucullus to report.

But there remains yet another point which demands explanation in this particular case. For why, it will be asked, if this is a natural form of recognition of a literary indebtedness, which the poet makes through the mouth of his character—why does the Clerk go on and make further acknowledgment to the literary source itself, the written tale of Petrarch? Here again the ancient dialogue furnishes us certain analogous examples which

serve to illustrate the underlying psychology of the phenomenon, though the decisive analogue will be derived from Chaucer himself. Although the dialogue is a fictitious reproduction of conversation, yet, since it is written to be read and not to be spoken, the dramatic fiction upon which it is based falls away more easily than in the case of real drama. The author therefore may at times lapse inadvertently from the strict consistency of the situation which he has created, and appeal directly to his audience as *readers*, instead of as *listeners* to the conversation of his interlocutors.

Inconsistencies of this sort in the ancient dialogue are found, but the instances are not numerous, or at all events have not often been observed. Thus for instance in *De legibus* (I, 15) Atticus addresses Cicero and says: "and yet if you ask what I expect (it is this): since you have *written* concerning the State, it seems fitting for you next to *write* concerning Laws." The allusion here is first to the earlier dialogue, that is *conversation*, *De re publica*, and next to the very discussion which they were about to take up in dialogue form, *De legibus*. Indeed, in the very sentence which follows Cicero shifts back again to the conversational point of view of dialogue with the words: "*visne igitur ut . . . quaeramus*," and a moment later: "*non enim id quaerimus hoc sermone*." The most conspicuous example of this sort to be found in Chaucer occurs in the *Seconde Nonnes Tale* (G. 78 ff.):

Yet preye I you that *reden* what I *wryte*, etc.

The undramatic character of this tale as a whole has, of course, long been recognized; yet the fact that such incongruities were not eliminated when the story was given a place in the framework of the *Tales* serves to illustrate how easily the shift from the attitude of speaker into that of writer could take place and be overlooked by the author.

It is such a lapse from the consistency of the dramatic situation which confronts us in the *Prologue* to the *Clerkes Tale*:

But forth to tellen of this worthy man,
That *taughte* me this tale, as I bigan,
I seye that first with heigh style he endyteth,
Er he the body of his tale *wryteth*, etc.

That is, as in the presentation of the matter assigned to the characters the dramatic fiction demands *speak* (or *hear*), and not *write* (or *read*), so also in the acknowledgment of contemporary sources the same rule holds, and *wryteth* is here a lapse from the consistency of the pose, implied in the earlier words of the prologue, analogous to the examples cited above. It may be urged that such an inconsistency would scarcely occur in such close proximity to the correct dramatic form *taughte me this tale* and the preceding *lerned at Padowe*. The only answer that can be made to this objection is to produce similar examples. One such I have cited from Cicero above; another—and this, I think, is decisive—is afforded by Chaucer at the end of the *Prologue* to *Melibeus*:

Ye shul not finden muche difference
 Fro the sentence of this tretis lyte
 After the which this mery tale I *wryte*.
 And therefor *herkneth* what that I shal seye,
 And let me *tellen* al my tale, I prey.

Much has been made of the fact that Chaucer here uses a form of acknowledgment such as he has not employed elsewhere in his *Canterbury Tales*. But to this it must be replied that the circumstances of his indebtedness are unique. Is there another example in the *Tales* of a story taken with such closeness of imitation from a source contemporary and of anything like equal eminence? Surely, Boccaccio cannot be instanced for the *Knight's Tale*; and indeed for any analogue at all one must fall back upon the story of the *Man of Law*, derived from the Anglo-Norman chronicle of Nicholas Trivet. But how different the circumstances of indebtedness: Trivet, a learned chronicler whose life barely, if at all, overlapped that of Chaucer, whose personality can scarcely have stood out for him in any sharpness of outline, whose work in general was of a quasi-historical character that would be thought of as merely recording the common possession of all mankind, and whose story of *Constance* was but one version of a tale widely diffused in the literature of the later Middle Ages. But these are problems quite apart from my purpose, and I should abuse the benevolence of the readers of *Modern Philology* if I ventured

farther afield in a territory which has been hospitable enough to receive me at all. To have shown that the form of acknowledgment which is apparently unique in Chaucer conforms to a general rule and to a type of technique found in a related form of ancient literature is all that I have aimed to do.

II. ON THE "HIGH STYLE" ATTRIBUTED TO PETRARCH'S VERSION OF THE STORY OF "GRISELDA"

Concerning the date of the *Clerk's Tale* Professor Skeat, on the confident assumption that Chaucer heard the story from Petrarch and received from him a copy of it, places it very early—that is, in 1373 or 1374. But no arguments of any validity—for the stanza form can scarcely be reckoned as in any way conclusive—are advanced for this date, even conceding the correctness of his fundamental assumption. Mr. Mather has reviewed the matter carefully in his valuable discussion in *Modern Language Notes* (Vol. XII, col. 15), and finds no reason why the composition should not be assigned to the general period of the *Canterbury Tales*—that is, after 1385. The fact would seem to be that the available material yields no certain chronological indication whatever.

But one thing can be said with certainty, viz., that the *Tale* was completely composed before the *Prologue* was written. The evidence for this lies in the fact that the proemium of Petrarch, descriptive of the scene of the story, is set forth twice with very inartistic effect—once at the end of the *Prologue*, and again in the first stanza of the *Tale* itself. That this is the case will appear from a mere comparison of the two parts with Petrarch's original, and the matter does not require detailed explanation. Professor Skeat has apparently overlooked this fact and seems to assume that the two descriptions follow Petrarch's introduction in orderly sequence; for on line 57,

There is at the west syde of Itaille
Down at the rote of Vesaulus the cold,

he says: "Chaucer is not quite so close a translator here as usual; the passage in Petrarch being, 'inter cetera ad radicem Vesuli, terra Salutiarum, vicis et castellis satis frequens, Marchionum arbitrio

altitudo orationis, which had been transmitted through the mediæval rhetoric. Although the matter has the appearance of a comment on Petrarch's words, yet it seemed worth while to refer to Petrarch to see if he gave any suggestion of the idea. I found, of course, that the reflections were in fact Petrarch's, introduced by these words: *hanc historiam stylo nunc alio retexere visum fuit, non tam ideo*, etc. The phrase *stylo alio* refers, of course, to the Latin of Petrarch's version contrasted with the Italian (*stylo volgari*) of Boccaccio's original. It was conceivable that Chaucer should call Petrarch's Latin, in contrast with Boccaccio's Italian, "heigh style,"¹ but with the analogy of classical usage in mind I could not repress a suspicion that Chaucer here either found *stylo alto* in his copy of Petrarch, or thus misread the true reading *stylo alio*. For this conjecture I afterward found unexpected confirmation in the extracts from Petrarch's original which are entered upon the margins of the Ellesmere and Hengwrt MSS,² and are reproduced on p. 402 of the Six-Text edition. There, against line 1142, are entered these words from Petrarch: "*hanc historiam stylo nunc alto retexere visum fuit*," etc.

It thus appears that the "heigh style" which Chaucer attributes to Petrarch's version as a whole is due in the first instance to a textual error. But this does not explain the use of the same description in the prologue. It would seem to me that the matter can be explained naturally in some such way as this: Carrying away from the first execution of the tale itself the memory of this stylistic characterization, Chaucer, on reverting to the subject when he incorporated the story into the *Canterbury Tales*, recognized the special truth of the words in reference to Petrarch's preface. Accordingly, when he added the prologue, he wrote:

I seye that with heigh style he endyteth,
Er he the body of his tale wryteth,
A proheme, etc.

¹ So Hertzberg, *ad loc.*: "Der hohe Stil bedeutet hier, und wenn ich nicht irre auch v. 7893, nur die lateinische Sprache im Gegensatz zum stilus vulgaris."

² To which Professor Kittredge, to whom I had referred my conjecture, called my attention. He added a warning concerning the wisdom of verifying the text of these entries, which I have to my regret not been able to heed.

The desire, then, to illustrate the elevated tone of Petrarch's proem was probably the motive which impelled him to duplicate his first stanza by a version which should reveal more specifically the "high style" of the Latin introduction. This he does with duplication of the essential parts of the first stanza already written, and with inclusion of the impressive geographical detail which he had omitted from his earlier version.

One other observation I will add here in connection with this example of the corruption of Chaucer's MS of Petrarch and the results which grew out of it. It has been the pleasant fancy of those who have insisted that Chaucer describes his own meeting with Petrarch in the *Clerkes Prologue*, that he received from Petrarch himself a copy of the *Griselda*: Professor Skeat would add compulsion by saying: "It is difficult to see how he could have got it otherwise" (Vol. III, p. 455, note). Mr. Hales, in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, has varied the same theme by urging that he most likely received it from Boccaccio in Florence in September, 1373. Again avoiding entanglement with the biographical question, I would point out that Chaucer's MS of Petrarch was already seriously corrupt—which, to be sure, might have been the case even with an author's presentation copy—and contained variants which would point to some degrees of removal from its origins. At line 420 Chaucer writes:

Thus Walter lowly, nay but royally,
Wedded with fortunat honestetee, etc.

The words of Petrarch, as edited in *Originals and Analogues* from the Basel edition of 1581, are: "Sic Gualtherus humili quidem sed insigni ac prospero matrimonio, honestatis," etc. The text is obviously corrupt, and we should doubtless read: "humili quidem sed insigni ac prospero matrimonio *honestatus*," etc.—though it is not safe to suggest even so simple a correction without a better knowledge of the actual condition of the evidence of the MSS. But the same corruption is found in the marginal entry of the Ellesmere MS, and it would therefore seem probable that Chaucer found it and owed to it his use of the word *honestetee*. For the words which follow,

In goddes pees liveth ful esily
 At hoom, and outward grace y-nogh had he,

the words of Petrarch are: "Summa domi in pace extra vero summa cum gratia hominum vivebat." It would seem here that Chaucer has added merely the word *goddes*. But the marginal entry of the Ellesmere MS presents the interesting variant "Summa dei in pace." It would seem, then, that Chaucer's copy must have presented both readings *dei* and *domi* ("in goddes pees—at hoom"), one in the text and the other in the margin or above the line, though concerning their exact relation it is impossible to speak. Of course, nothing can be done in problems of this sort until we have a thorough collation of the Petrarch MSS containing the story, and I have touched upon this one point, somewhat rashly I know, merely for the sake of indicating by a concrete illustration a most imperative prerequisite to any intelligent study of Chaucer's relation to Petrarch—a critical text of Petrarch's tale.

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